

What's a Leader to Do?

The Work FutureWise Leaders™ Are Called to Do

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We live in a world of increasing complexity, unceasing flux, frequent ambiguity, and inevitable unpredictability.

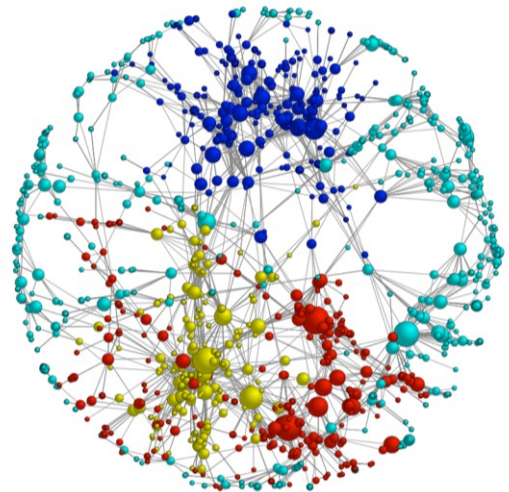
In such a world, leaders need to be FutureWise.

To be FutureWise is to be able to engage with situations and people in ways that promote positive outcomes for all concerned. It is to be able to adapt to uncertain circumstances and novel situations by seeking and seeing the possibilities, without ignoring or minimizing the challenges or potential harms—and acting in ways that enhance the chances of realizing the possibilities. Wisdom is demonstrated by acknowledging one's limitations and foibles, and bringing others in to share their insights, ideas, talents, and knowledge when facing complex, ambiguous, uncertain situations. Being FutureWise is to be able to balance the needs, aspirations, and constraints of multiple stakeholders in decision-making and take action compassionately and creatively. And, it means acting courageously to do what you believe is right and good even when others don't, but doing so in a way that increases the likelihood that others will join with you.

How can leaders develop and exercise such wisdom?

In a complementary article, “The Leadership Loop: A Framework for Navigating Our Times,” we stressed the importance of adopting new cognitive lenses through which to view our world—lenses that are designed explicitly for our times—as a fundamental starting point for becoming more FutureWise. In that article, we provided a powerful lens that we developed a few years ago that we call The Leadership Loop. If you haven't yet read that article yet, we recommend that you do so. You can find it [here](#).

In this article we are going to discuss a second framework that can aid greatly in developing deeper wisdom: a clear understanding of the *work* that leaders are called upon to do in this complex, volatile, uncertain world.



THE WORK FUTUREWISE LEADERS MUST DO

Leadership exists to enable an organization to realize its aspirations and achieve its goals. Leaders are there to help achieve results that matter to the organization.

This has always been the purpose of leadership and it's one thing that has not changed.

What has changed is the work that leaders must do in our time to fulfill that purpose. Adopting this new understanding of the purpose of leadership and the behaviours it involves will require letting go of some of our past (and current) perspectives on what it means to lead.

To put it bluntly, leaders must abandon the idea that the core work of leadership is for the person at the top (or the senior team as a whole) to bring their expertise and experience to bear in creating a vision for their organization or department; determine the best strategy on behalf of the business to realize that vision; create a workable plan to accomplish their chosen strategy; and ensure that the plan is executed efficiently and (ideally) flawlessly. This top-down approach to leadership is suited to a world that is largely stable, less complex, and more predictable.

That is no longer our world.

In our world where complexity, flux, volatility, and unpredictability are the norm, the work FutureWise leaders are called to do is different.

We describe it this way:

The work of FutureWise Leadership is the dynamic process of helping people together...

...make sense of what is,

...imagine what could be, and

...act to shape a positive future for all.

This description summarizes the essential nature and tasks of a FutureWise leader. So, let's unpack it.

First, we describe leadership as *a dynamic process*. It's not a title. Or a position. It's an active engagement with others that is continually shifting, evolving, and adapting according to the needs of the moment, the context of the circumstances, the potential that exists, and the particulars of the people involved.

The second thing to note is that this dynamic process has a definite intention behind it – namely, *helping people*. Leaders exist to serve. They serve the organization by helping it achieve its goals

and aspirations. And they serve the people they lead by helping them be successful in their particular roles.

To do that, leaders today must work in a collaborative fashion — with their peers, their direct reports, and their bosses. They must realize that in a world of continual flux and increasing complexity, no one individual has the necessary knowledge, wisdom, or insight to be able to lead by issuing directives and answering all the important questions. Rather, leaders need to be able to help people work *together* effectively, even as they lead from a collaborative stance themselves.

Understanding that “leadership is the dynamic process of helping people together...” expands our view of who is and who is not a leader in an organization. Possessing the title of CEO, VP, or Director does not equate with being a leader. Conversely, lacking a formal managerial or supervisory title does not mean that someone is not a leader in a group or organization.

Leadership is exercised when an individual seeks to engage with others to help them do things together—regardless of their title or position. Recognizing this allows us to draw upon the full resources of leadership in an organization. It points us to the possibility of expanding our organizational leadership capacity.

But to be effective in our day, leaders must be clear on what it is exactly that they need to help people do together if the organization is to realize its aspiration and achieve its goals, and help individuals thrive in their roles.

Our description of the work of leadership above highlights three fundamental tasks FutureWise leaders must perform.

MAKING SENSE OF WHAT IS

As the world grows more complex and things shift ever more rapidly, people are often unsure of what to make of their circumstances, or are confused and anxious about the present and/or future. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened such uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety, but it would be foolish to imagine that when the pandemic has passed, that people will be free of these. They are an inevitable outgrowth of the characteristics of our age.

Thus, a critical task for FutureWise leaders is to help people **make sense of what** is happening, and prepare everyone for creative, effective action.

There are three “moves” that are involved in sensemaking, each of which involves asking and seeking answers to particular questions.

Explore

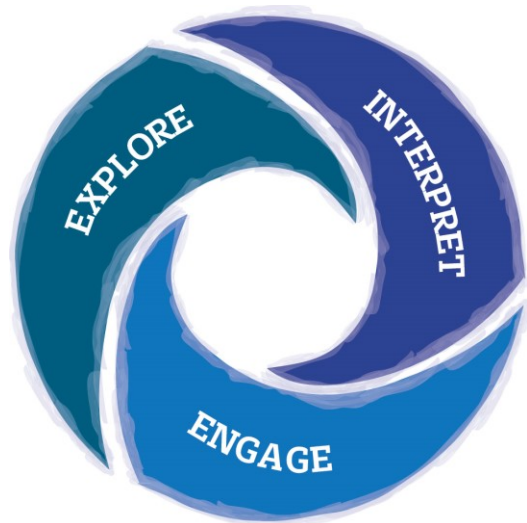
- › What's happening here?
- › What's changing?
- › What requires our deliberate attention?

Interpret

- › What does this mean?
- › What's the significance?
- › What do we make of it?
- › What's a new way to make meaning of it?

Engage

- › What does our new map/mental model point us to in terms of action?
- › What shall we do next?
- › What happens then?



Although we present these three moves here in a linear fashion, in reality the process is often anything but. We may engage in a particular move only to find that we need to go back and revisit an early one. Or the lines between them may blur. For example, as we seek to explore a situation, we may find that we are already beginning to interpret what we are discovering. And, as the graphic implies, the process is also cyclical. As we engage with our circumstances, we are exploring the impact of those actions in order to assess the effectiveness of our chosen course of action and also to learn at an even deeper level the realities that are involved in the system in which we are acting.

In the process of sensemaking there are three primary roles a FutureWise leader can play. Sometimes they will be the **primary sensemaker** themselves, doing the work of making sense of a situation, and then providing to other people their perception of what's going on and the implications of that for the group. This is often a critical sensemaking role in times of crisis or extremely rapid change. A second role they can play is to **facilitate the conditions** in which a group of individuals can work together to make sense of what's happening and its implications for the group. Other times they will act as a **player/coach** and be personally involved in discussions with others as a means of trying to develop a sense of what's happening, while also actively facilitating the conversation and/or helping others do better sensemaking themselves.

In our complex, turbulent, ambiguous world, being able to do and lead wise sense-making is a fundamental capability Future Wise leaders must master.

IMAGINING WHAT COULD BE

The second task of FutureWise leadership is to help people *imagine what could be*. Whereas Sensemaking is focused primarily on the present, imagining what could be focuses our attention and creative energies on the potential for the future.

The concept of using one's imagination at work is not one that is frequently discussed. But helping people (including yourself) develop and exercise it is crucial in responding effectively in a world filled with complexity, ambiguity, and new possibilities.

Imagination in this context does not mean pursuing flights of fancy, disconnected from reality. It *does* mean drawing upon creative energies to find new possibilities. It involves seeking answers to questions like, "How might we respond creatively to the challenges and opportunities that present themselves? What are the possibilities that we haven't yet envisioned? Where do we find new ways of thinking and acting in order to engage with the ambiguous, complex, and uncertain situations that are so common today?"



While we all have the potential to imagine new possibilities and to come up with novel, useful ideas to address opportunities and challenges, doing it well is another thing. Imagination is a capacity we need to, and are able to, continuously hone. At the same time, we need to realize that there are limits to one's individual capabilities in the midst of complexity. Thus we are wise to draw upon the imagination and creativity of others.

As with sensemaking, there are three primary roles FutureWise leaders can play in helping people "imagine what could be." One is to **offer to the group** a future possibility or creative solution in order to inspire and provoke others to bring their creativity to bear on the challenges and the possibilities. A second possible role is to **cultivate the conditions** that support creativity and innovation by attending to the structural and social factors that might enable or hinder the process. A third is to facilitate and coach others' creativity by being a **player/coach** who participates actively alongside others, and also acts to enhance and develop others' capabilities to see the potential in a situation and respond creatively.

FutureWise leaders help people together imagine what could be, enabling and equipping people to focus on possibilities, rather than problems, respond with pragmatic imagination, thus promoting and sustaining an atmosphere of hope and resilience in the midst of complexity, ambiguity, and flux.

ACTING TO SHAPE A POSITIVE FUTURE FOR ALL

The third task of the work of FutureWise leadership is helping people together *act to shape a positive future for all*. Ultimately, if leaders are to help the organization achieve its goals and aspirations, sensemaking and imagining must lead to concrete action. And, because in a complex world, other organizations, people, and the planet itself are part of the web of connections that our actions influence and affect, we seek to shape a future that is positive for all involved.

We cannot control the future, nor guarantee the outcomes we are seeking. That's impossible in our complex, fluid world. What we *can* do is to seek to shape it. Together, the members of a group can take wise actions that can increase the possibility of achieving what we desire. We can learn from actions that don't achieve them. We can respond wisely when the unanticipated happens (as it is bound to do).

Acting to shape the future as a group involves many things. Here we highlight three crucial ones in which FutureWise leaders must excel, and which we focus on in our FutureWise Leadership developmental program: decision-making, collaboration, and innovation.

Wise decision-making is in many ways the bridge between “imagining what could be” and “acting to shape the future,” and is thus a crucial element of leadership. FutureWise leaders seek to make smart decisions themselves, and facilitate the process with others. They know to judge the quality of a decision, not by its outcome, but by the nature of the process used to reach it. This requires from leaders an openness to learning from failures, humility in acknowledging that complexity means we can't fully predict the future, and courage to make choices in the midst of ambiguity and partial information (inevitable conditions in the midst of complexity and flux).


Because the implementation of decisions almost always involves others, leading **collaboration** is a second critical dimension of how leaders act to shape the future with others. FutureWise leaders have a strong orientation towards a collaborative mindset in working with those they lead and possess models and tools for making collaboration a reality in their teams, not just another business buzz word.

Closely related to decision-making and collaboration is the role that **innovation** plays when groups act to shape the future. The increased (and increasing) complexity of our world has created new problems and challenges for both our organizations and our clients/customers. Thus, innovation has emerged as a competitive advantage — indeed, a key component of organizational survival — in today's business environment. But innovation is not always driven by problem-solving. Sometimes through our sensemaking and imagining (the first two tasks of leadership), we discover unprecedented opportunities that require us to do something we've never attempted before if we are to take advantage of them. Thus, becoming familiar with frameworks, tools, and processes for leading innovation is now a crucial capacity for leadership effectiveness.

An experimental mindset is a capacity that greatly facilitates effective innovation. In complex systems, predicting the outcome of a particular action is difficult and often impossible. This means leaders

must let go of “fail-safe solution” thinking and shift to a “safe-to-fail” learning approach when contemplating and planning innovations. Using safe-to-fail experiments — wherein one takes actions on a smaller scale and observes how the system is responding in order to gain insight on how to then proceed — is a crucial approach to adopt in the midst of complexity. Developing a comfort with learning-by-experimenting and having the tools to be able to do so effectively greatly enhances a group’s ability to shape a positive future. A FutureWise leader is one who is developing the capacity and capability to lead such an approach to acting.

Together, when done wisely, these three aspects of acting to shape the future vastly improve the possibility and likelihood that a group will surmount current challenges and respond adaptively and effectively to our ever-changing, increasingly complex, possibility-filled world.



While the purpose of leadership has not changed — helping the organization achieve its purpose and aspirations — the context of leadership certainly has.

Deep wisdom is now an essential capacity for leaders to rise to the challenges, respond to emerging threats, and realize the unprecedented potential that also exists.

We need leaders who are FutureWise.

Want more info on our FutureWise Leadership developmental program?

Email us at either:

scott@bluedotstrategy.com or melinda.sinclair@gmail.com .

<https://www.futurewiseleadership.com/>